A Model of Political Violence
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Abstract:

Insurgencies continue to proliferate around the globe. While U.S. political and military leaders are eager to put counterinsurgency operations in the rear-view mirror, insurgency warfare is prolific. From the Philippines to Mexico, from Mali to China, from Chechnya to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, insurgency is the dominant strategic challenge of the early 21st century. The existing academic literature on insurgency is useful but insufficient. While each of the leading theories has value, no individual theory is fully explanatory of insurgency warfare. While some theories successful argue the factors that cause rebellion, they fail to explain why some groups do not rebel. This study proposes a model to explain the intrastate political violence of insurgency. While primarily focused upon insurgency, the model can be used for all types of political violence. This study presents a model that uses a holistic approach to the study of violence, synthesizing the concepts of deprivation, rational choice, and social movement theory. The model is a decision making model. It treats insurgency as an ongoing decision making process. The model can be used to explain the decision to start, continue, or end an insurgency. Finally, the model can also be used to analyze leadership of organizations whose primary function involves the use of force to achieve political objectives.

Insurgencies continue to proliferate around the globe. While other national security concerns may be a higher priority for the United States and the European Union, insurgency is the contemporary de facto "hot war." It is the predominant cause of military casualties across the globe. While U.S. political and military leaders are eager to put counterinsurgency operations in the rear-view mirror, insurgency warfare continues to be prolific. From the Philippines to Mexico, from Mali to China, from Chechnya to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, insurgency is the dominant strategic challenge of

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[1] The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the US Air Force Academy, the US Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the US government.

the early 21ˢᵗ century. Russia's intervention in Eastern Ukraine and the Islamic State's attempt to establish a caliphate are but the most prominent examples of contemporary insurgency warfare.

While insurgency is not new, academic interest in the topic ebbs and flows. The existing academic literature on the causes of political violence is useful but insufficient. While each of the leading theories has value, no individual theory is fully explanatory of insurgency warfare. While some theories successful argue the factors that cause rebellion, they fail to explain why some groups do not rebel. This study proposes a model to explain the organizational use of violence to achieve political objectives.

This study presents a model that uses a holistic approach to the study of violence, synthesizing the concepts of deprivation, rational choice, organizational leadership, and social movement theory. The model is a decision making model. It treats the use of force as an ongoing decision making process at both an individual and organizational level. The model serves two purposes. First, it provides a framework to analyze individual choice to join, stay, or quit an organization that employs violence. Along these lines, the model provides insight into how organizational leaders recruit, keep, and motivate individuals to commit or support the use of force to achieve political objectives. Second, the model explains the senior leader decision making process to start, continue, or end the use of violence.

The model views political violence as an organizational endeavor. Even "lone-wolf" terrorists and vigilantes typically act on behalf of an organization or, at least, upon their perception of that organization's goals. Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, is an example of a lone-wolf terrorist acting on behalf of an organization. Although conducted without organizational knowledge, McVeigh based the attack upon his perception of the goals of anti-government militia groups.

The violence decision making process can be simplified into two causal factors: capability and intent. But, capability and intent, themselves are complex factors shaped by numerous variables (see Figure 1). The capability for violence is based upon organizational skills, resources such as weapons and finances, and the ability to mobilize personnel. Of course, a group's ability to develop capability is partially dependent upon

external structural factors including the local government, the economy, and social dynamics. In the case of non-state actors, a group's capability can be constrained depending upon the state's willingness and capability to monitor and repress undesirable group behavior. While shaped by the same structural factors as capability, intent is driven directly be two factors: emotion-driven and rational choice.

Intent: Emotion-Driven Violence

The emotion-driven argument views violence as the result of anger. This does not mean to suggest that violence is perpetrated by individuals that are in a barbaric rage. It merely suggests that some grievances can drive people towards violence. Ted Gurr pioneered the emotion-driven argument with his theory of relative deprivation. Relative deprivation is the difference between people's perception of what they deserve and what they have.[2] This perception can be influenced by loss of something they had or failure to gain something that they anticipated. Wilkinson summarized the concept as articulated by psychologist John Dollard's: "severe frustration leads to anger and anger to acts of aggressive violence."[3] The sources of relative deprivation can be tied to any part of Maslow's Needs Hierarchy, especially physical needs (i.e., food, water, shelter) and safety needs (i.e., security, public health, job security).[4] Imagine these relative deprivation scenarios: troops burn down your house; land reform was promised but did not happen; your land was seized and given to someone else; government policies ruined your employment opportunities; the state education system promised you a good job upon graduation, but failed to deliver; improved literacy and access to media highlights how poor and unhealthy your situation is relative to others. The higher tiers of Maslow's hierarchy are also relevant. Love (the government kills your family, the enemy kills a member of your team) and self-esteem (the raid on your home dishonored you, a successful enemy attack in a sector under your control embarrasses you) can also contribute to relative deprivation.[5]

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[2] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 24.

[3] Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State*, 34.

[4] A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* (1943): 370–96.

[5] Gurr mentions Maslow's Needs Hierarchy in passing as a potential way to measure relative deprivation. The examples given here are merely examples to help illustrate the concept of relative deprivation.

While relative deprivation can come in many forms, much of the literature focuses on the economic causes of violence.[6]   Economics can result in relative deprivation in one of two ways. During economic crisis, it can degrade an individual's ability to meet basic physical needs. During economic growth, individuals may perceive that they are missing the benefits of growth. For example, in an economic system in which the means of production or concentrated in the hands of a few actors, the advantages of an economic boom may not permeate to the average worker. It is important to note that the emphasis is on the change in relative deprivation, not absolute deprivation (though an absolute change could result in a relative change). For instance, if a poor person has always been poor and anticipates being poor in the future, then that person is unlikely to resort to violence based on economic deprivation since their continued poverty was an expected outcome.

The theory of relative deprivation is often misunderstood due to a similar sounding political economy concept called relative gains. The concept of relative gains focuses upon an individual's gain or loss relative to his competitor. Relative deprivation, on the other hand, is rarely competitor based. For instance, if you were a middle-income earner living in California during the "dot com" 1990s, your neighbors involved in technology were gaining far more than you. Unless you had some expectation that you should have gained from the dot com boom, then you suffered a relative loss compared to neighbors (although you may have had an absolute gain in your income), but did not necessarily suffer relative deprivation. On the other hand, if you had lost your life savings in a dot com bust while all of your neighbors had dot com booms, the potential for relative deprivation exists.

Gurr's theory has additional explanatory power when it is combined with James Davies's theory of rising expectations. Davies argues that revolution occurs when needs satisfaction is in the shape of an inverted J-curve. Using examples from the United States, Russia, and Egypt, Davies shows that rebellion occurred when "rising

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[6] See ; *Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, 57; Linz and Stepan, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe, 4; Tarrow, Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965–1975, 21; Wilkinson, Terrorism and the Liberal State, 37; Ekkart Zimmerman, Political Violence, Crises, and Revolution (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing, 1983), 284.*

expectations [were] followed by their effective frustration."[7] Rising expectations could be fueled by either political or economic change. As countries transition to a democratic system or to a capitalist economy, there is likely an expectation of improved conditions. But, the administrative disturbance inherent in such a systemic change can involve a temporary disruption in the provision of basic services inflicting short-term growing pains, frustrating citizens' expectations and creating a type of relative deprivation.

The problem with the theories of Gurr and Davies is not that they have been discredited as some claim, but that the theories, like many sociology theories, are not falsifiable. There is no threshold that indicates how much a person needs to be relatively deprived before they decide to rebel. Without a threshold, the theories are a tautology: if a group does not rebel, it is because they had not been relatively deprived *enough*. Because of this fault, his theory fails to explain why some relatively deprived people do not rebel. While he successfully made the relative deprivation—violence connection, neither Gurr nor Davies explored alternative outcomes of relative deprivation (e.g., suicide, drug addiction, crime).

Additionally, the focus on expectations fails is an over-simplification of the decision making process that determines who is to blame for the relative deprivation. After more than a dozen years working with the Iraqi military, anecdotal stories from US veterans indicates that recent ISIS success in northern Iraq deprived them of a previous sense of accomplishment. But, the target of the relative deprivation is less clear. Clearly, ISIS is at fault for conducting the attacks. But, some express anger at the Iraqi military for their partial collapse. Others express anger at the US government for failing to work harder to make an agreement to keep US forces in Iraq, giving ISIS time to regroup. In another example, if an insurgent group destroys a farm, does the farmer blame the insurgent group for the act of destruction? Or does the farmer blame the government for their inability to protect him from the insurgents? These two cases demonstrate that relative deprivation is an incomplete answer for determining intent. The other side of the intent coin is determined by rational choice.

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[7] James C. Davies, "Towards a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review* 27, no. 1 (1962): 14.

Intent: Rational Violence

Much of the literature on violence shows a sharp divide between the two camps that explore intent. This is exemplified in the greed versus grievance arguments. The grievance argument believes that emotions drive an individual to violence. The individual is angry about some way that he was wronged and seeks vengeance. Yet, from an organizational perspective, the grievance argument is insufficient. Not every member of a violent organization has a personal grievance against the adversary. In 2001, many senior members of Al Qaeda were wealthy elites. Arguably, they were more driven by ideological than by personal grievances.

The greed camp, and other rational choice theorists, argues that there is a type of cost-benefit analysis for participation in political violence.[8] The benefit of righting the wrong is worth the cost of rebellion. Even experts not committed to rational choice theory find that there are some rational aspects to choosing violence.[9] Within this context, people are driven to the cost-benefit analysis of violence when they find that they are unable to address their grievances through the existing political process.

The rational argument indicates that individuals must perceive that they will gain some benefit from political violence. Violence must be perceived as a useful method for achieving some ends. This perception can be influenced by the success of other groups either domestically or internationally. For instance, a variety of Latin Americans were inspired to rebel by the Cuban Revolution. The perception can also be reinforced by domestic history. "The greater the extent of historical violence, the more likely it is that some groups have found it effective."[10] Even failed rebellions tend to result in some positive changes (from the rebels perspective). The benefits of violence vary upon the situation, but often include power, profit, or civil liberties. Certainly, members of state organizations which use force perceive benefits in their compliance with orders.

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[8] See James DeNardo, *Power in Numbers: The Political Strategy of Protest and Rebellion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); Harvey Waterman, "Reasons and Reason: Collective Political Activity in Comparative and Historical Perspective," *World Politics* 33, no. 4 (1981): 554–89.

[9] See Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965–1975*; Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*; Linz and Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*; Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 385, 96.

[10] Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 327.

Violence may help to achieve political goals such as the defeat of an adversary or improvement of internal security. Rewards for compliance can vary from a good performance report to the physical acquisition of goods from looting.

Benefits, of course, are only part of the equation. Costs must also be taken into account. However, cost is not solely considered in numbers of lives or resources in this case. It is primarily a risk management decision. Risk management assessments are based on the available group resources, group leadership, group support from the masses and/or elites, the perceived legitimacy of the state, and the state's capacity for repression. It seems unlikely, though, that violence is purely based on cold calculations. This would not do well to explain rebellions in countries that have a massive capacity for repression (e.g., Egypt) or the lack of rebellion in militarily weak countries (e.g., Iceland). A synthesis of the two arguments indicates that violence results when the emotional argument and the rational argument intersect to create the perfect storm.

The rational thought versus emotion is a false dichotomy. Intent requires a combination of emotion and rational thought. A cost-benefit analysis for violence is not simply an algebraic exercise. Emotion shapes the perceived costs and benefits of choice. Citizens in autocratic societies tend to have limited alternatives for addressing grievances. Autocratic governments not only suffer from legitimacy issues, but can result in citizen frustration due to an inability to influence the political system. These frustrations and perceptions of legitimacy are key factors that can change the perceived costs and benefits of rebellion.

Leadership: manipulating intent.

For organizations that focus upon the use of force, a key role of a leader is to motivate individuals to take significant personal risk to employ deadly force against an organizational-designated adversary. The leader's role is a two-phase process: recruitment and sustainment. The process can be one of either coercion or cooperation.

Coercion can be an effective method of recruiting a large number of people in a short amount of time. The Lord's Resistance Army is largely sustained by coercion.

Although it only has a few hundred soldiers, this insurgent-group turned criminal gang raids rural villages and takes women and children as captive servants. Of course, members recruited by coercion lack loyalty to the organization and are a flight risk.

Upon joining an organization, an individual's cost-benefit equation is influenced by the organizations formal and informal rules. Most organizations that use force have formal rules regarding individual compliance with orders to use force. The organization increases the benefits of carrying out violence threatening costs for failure to comply with orders to use force. Military organizations typically use courts-martial while non-state actors may resort to public executions. In extreme cases, the execution includes family members as an additional technique to deter other potential defectors.

Leaders articulate the advantages of the benefits relative to the costs, particularly the benefits to the individual or to the nation. In cases of some suicide bombers, the benefits go to the family members. Organizations may also attempt to reduce the perception of costs by emphasizing their efforts on safety, security, and team support.

One method leaders use to shape intent is exploitation of differences in identity. A common identity can be used to stoke nationalist ideals to draw in and sustain support for the cause.[11] Whether based upon region, ethnicity, or religion, this method can be used to exaggerate the threat posed by a competing group. Some organizations take this to the extreme with thorough indoctrination programs and tight controls on external communications to limit exposure to alternative viewpoints. When taken to extremes, the focus on identity differences can be used to dehumanize the enemy.

Dehumanizing the enemy reduces the perceived moral and psychological costs of killing the adversary.[12] The adversary can contribute further to this identity division by committing atrocities or violating the law of war. Regardless of whether the acts were organizationally condoned, the opposition can use this information to further dehumanize the enemy. While dehumanization can lead to underestimation of enemy capabilities, the technique has a record of effectiveness for manipulating individual intent. Prominent

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[11] Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2000), 32.

[12] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 103-119.

ethnic divide examples include World War II propaganda that depicted the Japanese as vermin or apes and Rwanda ethno-extremist propaganda of the early 1990s that equated their Tutsi targets as cockroaches. A contemporary example of religious manipulation is the Islamic State's claims that their targets are apostates or infidels because they follow a different sect of Islam.

Capability

Intent is a key factor in understanding and influencing an organization's ability to use violence. However, without the corresponding capability to conduct violence, intent alone is unlikely to result in an effective use of violence. An organizations efficacy to conduct violence is a combination of intent and capability. Much of the research on organizational capability was explored through the analysis of social movements.

Contemporary social movement theory, as refined by the likes of Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, and Mayer Zald, incorporates aspects of both intent and capability for the production of rebellion. These studies highlight two aspects of capability. One, highlighted by Charles Tilly, is the ability and resources to organize a group. Organizing a violent group requires facilities, funds, weapons, and management skills. Without these skills and resources, the group will not function. This concept convinced some social movement theorists that Ted Gurr's theory on relative deprivation was discredited. Since people in poverty do not have the resources to organize, some assumed that deprivation could not be a cause of rebellion. However, this assumption is clearly a perversion of Gurr's theory, which is not about poverty itself, but an individual's frustration created by a radical life change (or failure of expected change). The second aspect to capability involves the ability to mobilize. Regardless of the ability to get resources, the group will die if it cannot get people to show up and participate. While established organizations can rely upon hierarchy and an established communications network to mobilize their people, emerging and informal organizations

rely upon social and professional networks.[13]   The rise of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn greatly expanded the velocity and volume of social network interactions which can be leverage for mobilization.

Theories of organizational violence that focus upon the capacity to mobilize are insufficient. While social movement theory is a reasonable explanation to explain why individuals join protests and riots, it does not convincingly explain why individuals join groups that routinely use political violence. For instance, the concept of collective interests formed by a collective identity does not fully explain why some individuals would associate their personal interests with the collective interests while others would not. By itself, this concept fails to explain why individuals would provide resource support to a rebellion, but not participate in the group itself. The major problem of solely focusing on capability without viewing intent is the failure to explain *which* group an individual would join: the revolutionaries versus the counter-revolutionaries.

Mobilization is inextricably linked with intent. Mobilization, while facilitated by social exchanges, is based upon convincing individuals that they have a shared intent and, ideally, a shared identity. This shared intent and shared identity can be cultivated from marketing, social media, and other recruiting techniques. In extreme cases, an external catalyst can spark a cultural or ideological response to outsider attempts to impose adjustments on society (e.g., adjustments such as economic or political reforms, modernization [cultural reforms]).[14]   Shortly after 9/11, the ranks of the U.S. military swelled despite a lack of significant change in advertising.

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[13] Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2; Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Mass.: Addison–Wesley Pub. Co., 1978), 7.

[14] Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed., Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 201.
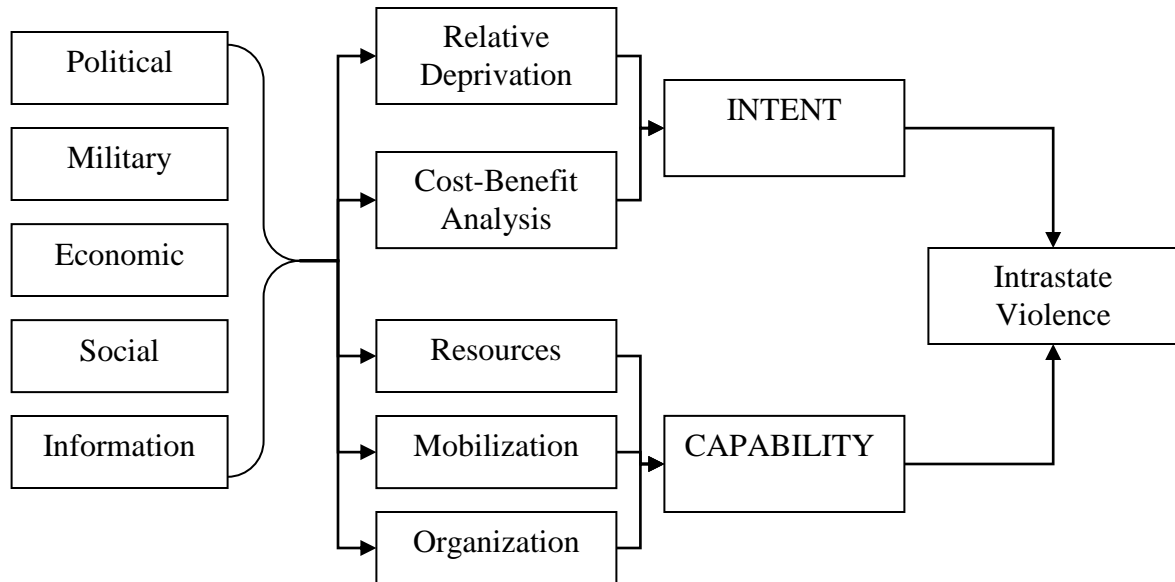
**Structural or
System Change**

Figure 1. Factors that Influence Intrastate Violence

An organization's efficacy to conduct violence is the result of a combination of both intent and capability (see Figure 1). Intent is driven by a combination of emotion and rational cost-benefit analysis. Capability is the culmination of the accumulation of resources, the capacity to mobilize personnel, and the ability to organize the two. All of these factors can be influenced by systemic changes.

Drastic political and economic changes can occur swiftly, acting as a catalyst. A transition from a dictatorship to a democracy often involves a decrease in internal security efforts as the state intelligence apparatus is dismantled, groups are given new freedoms, the state reduces repression of opposition forces, and certain aspects of the law may be suspended while a new constitution is developed. Existing revolutionary groups that initiated the transition may refuse to disband, take advantage of the reduced security, and challenge the state's monopoly on the use of force. Furthermore, the success of violent opposition during the transition establishes a perception that violence can be a useful tool for achieving objectives.

A surprising military attack, an embarrassing military defeat, or the presence of foreign troops can all play a major factor. For military organizations, they are often reliant upon other government institutions to provide the necessary resources. Insurgency groups often have a dependency upon the population and foreign supporters. In some cases, both military organizations and insurgent groups have carried out criminal activity in order to generate their resources independently of external sources. Additionally, an insurgent group's ability to improve its capability to use force is partially dependent upon the state's ability to prevent group activity. For example, North Korea is highly adept at preventing mobilization through a tightly controlled communications network. Prolonged economic stagnation and an aggressive secret police, while a potential source of relative deprivation, have largely negated the ability to either assemble resources or organize a resistance. While social systems are usually slow to change, information systems can be used to inflame (or deescalate) social divides such as in the Rwanda genocide case.

Conclusion

Political violence is the result of an organization's ability to harness individual intent and group capability. Groups can exploit the weaknesses in the structural environment to inflame the emotions of individuals. Additionally, groups can leverage communications outlets and social media to shape individual perceptions of the perceived costs and benefits of violence, virtually organize, garner resources, and mobilize forces. Of course, there are multiple players in the communication game. Competing groups also have an opportunity to influence individual perceptions driving interest in the use of offensive cyber operations to degrade competitor social media sites.

The model has numerous uses. It can be used to analyze the specific factors that catalyzed a specific violent event or growth of an insurgency. Alternatively, it can be used as a framework to analyze alternatives for mitigating or countering insurgent or terrorist operations. The framework also indicates that any type of counterinsurgency operation needs to address both intent and capability.